“On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (1974)

Donald Davidson rejects conceptual relativism by arguing that the notion of untranslatable conceptual schemes is incoherent. By dismantling the scheme-content dualism, Davidson posits that shared, objective beliefs about a common reality are necessary for communication, rendering the idea of distinct, subjective conceptual filters invalid.

To appreciate Davidson’s intervention, one must look to Willard Van Orman Quine, who famously dismantled two dogmas of empiricism: the analytic-synthetic distinction and reductionism. Quine replaced these with a holistic "web of belief," wherein our beliefs face the tribunal of experience as a corporate body. However, Davidson argues that Quine left a third, more insidious dogma intact:

The Scheme-Content Dualism: The view that reality, or raw sensory experience, is something neutral and uninterpreted, while human languages or minds provide the "conceptual schemes" that organize, shape, or fit that raw data.

This dualism implies that different minds or cultures could possess radically different, mutually untranslatable conceptual schemes. Where one scheme organizes experience into a world of physical substances, another might organize it into a fluid web of events, leaving the two communities unable to genuinely communicate or evaluate each other’s claims. Davidson sets out to show that this very picture is unintelligible.

Organizing vs. Fitting the World

Davidson begins by analyzing the two primary metaphors used to describe how a scheme relates to content: a scheme either organizes or fits experience (or reality).

1. Organizing

The metaphor of organization requires a plurality of things to arrange. A conceptual scheme might organize a closet full of clothes or a sea of sensory impressions. However, Davidson notes that you cannot organize the cosmos as a single entity, just as you cannot organize a single closet by looking at a single shirt. If schemes organize experience, they must operate on discrete units within experience. But if two languages organize the same discrete objects differently, we must already be able to identify those objects to know they are being organized. Thus, the metaphor of organization presupposes a shared, underlying understanding of the world, undermining the claim of radical incommensurability.

2. Fitting

The metaphor of "fitting" faces a deeper logical problem. To say a conceptual scheme fits experience is simply to say that the sentences held true within that scheme are backed by sensory evidence. In empiricist terms, a scheme fits the world if it is generally true. But if a scheme is simply a system of true sentences, the claim that two schemes are radically different amounts to the claim that there can be a language full of truths that is entirely untranslatable into our own.

This brings Davidson to the core of his argument: the relationship between truth and translation.

The Translation Test and Tarski's Constraint

Davidson argues that our only criterion for recognizing a behavior as language-use—or an utterance as a sentence—is our ability to translate it. If a traveler encounters a remote tribe and observes them making vocalizations, the traveler can only conclude those vocalizations constitute a language if they can map them onto their own assertions about the world.

To formalize this, Davidson invokes Alfred Tarski’s semantic conception of truth. For Davidson, a theory of truth for a language is functionally equivalent to a theory of translation.

If we cannot construct T-sentences for a foreign tongue—if there is no way to specify the conditions under which their sentences are true using our own language—then we have no philosophical ground for calling their behavior a "language" or a "conceptual scheme" at all. We cannot say, "They have a conceptual scheme, but it is completely untranslatable," because the only evidence for them having a scheme is their possession of a translatable language. Radical untranslatability equals non-language.The Principle of CharityHow then do we translate an unfamiliar language without falling into skepticism? Davidson introduces the Principle of Charity.When interpreting a speaker, we cannot separate what they mean by their words from what they believe about the world. If a foreign speaker points at a horse and says "Equus," we have to choose: do they mean "horse," or do they mean "cow" but happen to have a wildly mistaken belief that this horse is a cow?Charity dictates that we must optimize agreement. We must assume that, in the vast majority of cases, the speaker is rational and their beliefs about the environment are correct by our own lights. We do this not out of naive optimism, but because it is a methodological prerequisite for interpretation. If we assume the speaker is systematically wrong about everything, we lose the very foothold

needed to assign meaning to their words.The Implication: To understand another mind, we must project our own broad view of the world onto them. Disagreement is only possible against a massive background of shared, true beliefs.Dismantling Relativism and RealismBy tying conceptual schemes to translatable languages, and translation to a shared foundation of truth, Davidson collapses both cultural relativism and global skepticism.Relativism Fails: The relativist claim that different cultures inhabit different conceptual worlds requires that these worlds be distinct yet recognizable as worlds. Davidson shows that we can only recognize another group as having beliefs if we can translate them, which requires finding them mostly right about the world.Skepticism Fails: The skeptic worries that our entire conceptual scheme might be a massive illusion, failing to fit objective reality. But Davidson's holism demonstrates that belief is inherently veridical (truth-tracking). For a state to count as a belief at all, it must sit within a web of interpretation that is anchored to the real world through causal interactions.Ultimately, Davidson does not conclude that we all share the same conceptual scheme. Rather, he concludes that the phrase "conceptual scheme" has no meaningful application.By abandoning the dualism of scheme and content, philosophy is released from the task of building a bridge between the mind and the world. We find ourselves re-established in direct, unmediated contact with an objective reality that we share, by logical necessity, with all other thinking beings.